Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus

Supporting Women In Public Life

Report of an event engaging women leading in politics and public life in Northern Ireland with representatives of Women's Caucuses in the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd and the Oireachtas

Contents

1. Aims, Objectives and Membership

The Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus was set up in 2016 following a recommendation by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in its *Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly* report.

The Caucus is a united, cross-party forum made up of all current women MLAs and Lesley Hogg, the Clerk / Chief Executive of the Assembly.

Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Women's Caucus

The aim of the Caucus is to address the under-representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland.

The objectives of the Caucus are to:

- Champion and support the recommendations for action listed in the Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly 2015 report in partnership with the political parties, the Assembly and the Executive;

- Champion the practical implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in partnership with the All-Party Group on Women Peace and Security;

- Work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Women's Sector to support individual women wanting to become further involved in politics;

- Work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Women's, Youth and Education Sectors as well as the media to promote the idea of gender-equality in political representation as essential and achievable with the correct targeted action; and

- Facilitate gender-specific training, coaching and study exchanges for female MLAs in partnership with the Assembly's Member Support Services.

The Steering Group sets the direction for the Women's Caucus, agrees priority work streams and a Forward Work Programme, and provides the operational decision-making function. The membership of the Steering Group is as follows[1]:

- Claire Sugden MLA (Chairperson)

- Cara Hunter MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

- Diana Armstrong MLA

- Cheryl Brownlee MLA

- Pam Cameron MLA

- Linda Dillon MLA

- Connie Egan MLA

- Diane Forsythe MLA

- Cathy Mason MLA

- Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

- Emma Sheerin MLA

- Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive

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[1] Diana Armstrong joined the Steering Group, 13 November 2024; Pam Cameron replaced Deborah Erskine on the Steering Group, 22 October 2025; Paula Bradshaw resigned from the Steering Group, 11 February 2026, Cara Hunter replaced Sinead McLaughlin on the Steering Group, 23 February 2026; Cara Hunter was appointed Deputy Chairperson, 23 February 2026

2. Background and Event purpose

At its meeting of 12 November 2025, the Steering Group agreed that the Women's Caucus would organise an event focused on supporting women in public life. Members also agreed that a report of the event should be produced and to seek to schedule a debate to mark International Women's Day on 3 March 2026.

The theme for International Women's Day 2026 is *Give to Gain*. This campaign encourages a mindset of generosity and collaboration, highlighting the power of reciprocity and support. The message is clear - when women thrive, society as a whole benefits. Whether through sharing knowledge, providing resources or infrastructure, increasing visibility, advocacy for others, or contributing through education, training, mentoring, or time, contributing to women's advancement helps create a more inclusive and interconnected world.

Reflecting this year's theme, the Caucus hosted the, "***Supporting Women in Public Life***" event, designed to bring together women's caucuses from across the UK and Ireland. The event encouraged conversations on how women in politics can strengthen networks of collaboration, mutual support, and shared success. It provided opportunities to exchange knowledge, opportunities, build relationships and explore opportunities for joined-up working.

Invitations were issued on behalf of the Caucus to all women MLAs, local councillors, and MPs who represent Northern Ireland constituencies. Representatives from the women's caucuses from the Welsh Senedd, the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Parliament were invited to attend.

3. Event Overview

Pre-conference Dinner

A pre-conference dinner took place on Wednesday 4 February in the Great Hall in Parliament Buildings. Female leaders from across the public, private and voluntary sectors attended the dinner, alongside MLAs, local councillors and representatives from the women's caucuses from the Welsh Senedd, the Scottish Parliament and the Oireachtas.

Elected representatives, businesswomen, charity leaders and senior civil servants attended the pre-dinner conference

Attendees began the evening with a networking reception before Emma Sheerin MLA formally opened the event and welcomed guests on behalf of the Women's Caucus. Between courses, Jayne Brady, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service provided the keynote speech, highlighting the importance of ensuring strong female representation across the public sector and outlining initiatives introduced within the Civil Service to support, develop and retain women in leadership roles.

Diana Armstrong MLA closed the evening on behalf of the Women's Caucus. Throughout the event, the contribution of women leaders was recognised and celebrated; however, there was a shared sense that further progress is needed to ensure women remain in public life and to inspire the next generation of female leaders.

Pre-conference dinner featuring contributions from Emma Sheerin MLA, Michelle Guy MLA, Diana Armstrong MLA and Jayne Brady, Head of the NI Civil Service

Supporting Women in Public Life Conference

The conference took place on Thursday 5 February in Parliament Buildings and brought together representatives from the women's caucuses from the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh

Senedd. Local councillors and representatives from local government also attended as invited guests.

Junior Minister, Joanne Bunting MLA

Junior Minister, Aisling Reilly MLA

The conference opened with remarks by the Junior Ministers, Joanne Bunting MLA and Aisling Reilly MLA. Both Ministers noted the need to keep championing and advancing women into politics. They shared their reflections on their own journey into public life and offered advice for those at the beginning of their political careers.

Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Donna Traynor, Nuala Griffiths, Roseann Kelly and Madam Justice McBride

The first panel session, entitled **'Forging the Path'** featured contributions from Madam Justice McBride; Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Mental Health Champion for NI; Roseann Kelly, CEO Women in Business and Nuala Griffiths, Vice Chair Women'sTEC. The panellists discussed their personal experiences, the barriers and challenges they encountered, and the support that helped them progress.

Kristina Wilfore

Kristina Wilfore, from Reset Tech and founder of *#ShePersisted*, delivered the keynote speech. In her address, she outlined the increasing challenges women in public life face in the digital sphere, including online abuse, misinformation, and coordinated attempts to undermine female leadership and situated these developments within the wider context of general digital harms and how online platforms operate, generate revenue and engage with regulation. She

introduced the Digital Resilience Toolkit, a resource developed to help women in politics better understand these threats and build practical skills to protect themselves and their work online.

Kristina explained how the toolkit offers guidance on recognising harmful online behaviours, enhancing personal digital security, and developing strategies to respond effectively to hostile or misogynistic content. She also highlighted the importance of collective action - emphasising that political institutions, parties, and support networks all have a role to play in creating safer online environments. Her keynote underscored that strengthening digital resilience is essential not only for protecting individual women in public life, but also for safeguarding democratic participation more broadly.

Michelle Maher, Hannah Stevens, Aoife Clements

The second panel session, **The Power of Support – Encouraging Women to Stand,** explored the vital role that sustained encouragement, practical guidance and peer networks play in helping women enter and remain in political life. The panel featured Michelle Maher from See Her Elected, Hannah Stevens from Elect Her, and Aoife Clements from 50:50 NI - three organisations that work directly with women considering political involvement.

Each panellist outlined the work their organisation does to build confidence, skills and community among women who may feel uncertain about taking the first step into public life. They highlighted that, while interest among women is strong, many still face structural and personal barriers, including a lack of role

models, limited access to party networks, caring responsibilities, financial constraints, and concerns about public scrutiny and online abuse.

Across the discussion, the panellists stressed that support must continue beyond election - helping women stay in political life by ensuring they have networks, mentoring and organisational backing throughout their careers.

Members of the Youth Assembly with Speaker Poots and former Speakers Alex Maskey and Eileen Bell

Over lunch, attendees were joined by invited guests including the Speaker, Edwin Poots MLA, former speaker Alex Maskey, and Eileen Bell, the first female Speaker.

The final session of the day involved female members of the Youth Assembly and the female parliamentarians from the Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd and the Oireachtas. They spoke about their motivations for entering politics and the people and experiences that inspire them. All attendees concluded the session with a personal pledge outlining how they intend to support and encourage more women to enter—and remain in—public life.

The event benefitted from cross-party representation as well as attendance from elected representatives across Northern Ireland. Attendees praised the event, the organisation and its purpose.

The Women's Caucus thanks all participants, panellists and guests for giving so generously of their time and expertise to make this an enriching experience for all involved.

Members of the Women's Caucuses from the NI Assembly, the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd with Members of the NI Assembly's Youth Assembly and local councillors

4. Issues raised

Participants welcomed the opportunity to engage in open and honest conversations and share their experiences. Discussions highlighted the varied paths women take into politics and the range of challenges and barriers they encounter along the way. There was a strong sense of commonality across all legislatures, with attendees recognising that many of the issues faced by women in political life are shared and persistent.

The conference emphasised the importance of supporting women not only to stand for election but also to remain in politics once elected. It reaffirmed the value of organisations that encourage, train and advocate for women's political participation, and the need to ensure that these support structures continue to be strengthened.

4.1 Misogyny and Online Abuse

The first panel, 'Forging the Path' explored the experiences of female leaders working in traditionally male dominated environments including law, construction, and business. Panellists described how they had encountered stereotypes, discrimination and misogyny throughout their careers.

They noted that while progress has been made and women are increasingly visible across all sectors, discrimination and sexist attitudes still exist, but often in a more subtle or indirect form. What was once dismissed as unconscious bias is now, in some cases, becoming a deliberate and targeted response, amplified through technology and social media.

The panel discussed the particular challenges faced by women in public life, highlighting the disproportionately high level of scrutiny they experience. The panellists stressed the need for women to support each other, and for male allies to challenge inappropriate behaviour when it arises. They emphasised that organisations have a responsibility to safeguard their female leaders by prioritising investment in digital safety and wellbeing.

The conference heard from Kristina Wilfore, Reset Tech and founder of #ShePersisted. Kristina outlined the increasing impact of social media and digital technology on women in public life, explaining how gendered disinformation campaigns are used to undermine women's credibility,

confidence and public standing. She shared global examples illustrating the scale and variety of such attacks not just on women. Kristina noted that there is no single or immediate solution; instead, women need strong support networks, resilience-building tools and organisational backing.

She emphasised that disengaging from social media is not a realistic option for women in public life, as it remains an essential platform for communication and engagement. Rather, women and institutions must be equipped to use technology strategically to counter harm and strengthen their online presence.

4.2 Encouraging women to stand

Participants acknowledged the significant progress made in recent years, noting that both our First and Deputy First Ministers, as well as the Juniors Ministers, are women. However, it was recognised that further work is needed to encourage women to enter and to ensure they remain in political life once elected.

The conference heard from Elect Her, See her Elected and 50:50 NI – organisations working across the UK and Ireland to encourage and support women into political roles. These organisations highlighted the many barriers for women standing for election including –

- Online and offline abuse;
- Concerns for personal safety;
- Balancing family commitments and caring responsibilities, with women often carrying the cognitive load for family life;
- The financial pressures associated with standing for election; and
- A lack of confidence and feelings of imposter syndrome.

Each organisation provide training, resources and practical support to help women overcome these barriers and prepare for political participation. The conference emphasised the importance of ensuring women are represented across all levels of political life, noting that enhanced gender balance strengthens democracy and better reflects the diversity of society.

The role of the Women's Caucus in providing support to women once they have entered political life was highlighted as an important mechanism for helping to remain women in politics. The Caucus offers a cross-party space where women

can share experiences, discuss common challenges and build relationships in a constructive and encouraging environment.

4.3 Confidence to stand and the next generation

The conference also welcomed female members of the Youth Assembly to discuss their motivations for becoming involved in politics and their hopes for the future. It was acknowledged for women having the confidence to stand could be a significant barrier, and having the support from women who have navigated political pathways was invaluable in helping other women to take the first step. The Junior Ministers in the opening speeches, shared how people, whether it be party members or family members had given them the confidence to stand for election. They noted the need for women to move from a default position of "I don't think I can do that", to "yes I can".

To conclude the conference, participants were invited to make a personal pledge outlining an action they would take in the future to help other women in politics. Many pledged to mentor, encourage and support women considering public life, recognising the collective importance of fostering the next generation of female leaders.

A selection of conference attendees with their pledges

5. Next steps

The pre-conference dinner provided the Caucus with valuable face-to-face engagement with female leaders and representatives from across Northern Ireland and representatives from the women's caucuses from the Oireachtas, the Welsh Senedd and the Scottish Parliament. The Women's Caucus extends its gratitude to all those that attended and contributed to the success of the event.

The conference itself created an important opportunity for women's caucuses from across the UK and Ireland to meet in person for the first time, share experiences and explore future areas for collaboration. A clear consensus emerged on the value of bringing female representatives together in this way, enabling them to exchange insights, strengthen connections and build supportive networks. The Caucuses committed to exploring opportunities to continue working together and provide mutual support.

In the coming months, the Caucus will continue to work in partnership with others to address the under-representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland, to advance its objectives and to help realise a society in which women are equally represented in political and public life.

This Report can be made available in a range of formats including large print, Braille etc. For more information please contact:

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